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THE STORYTELLER™
Tale Four of Four
Sirens
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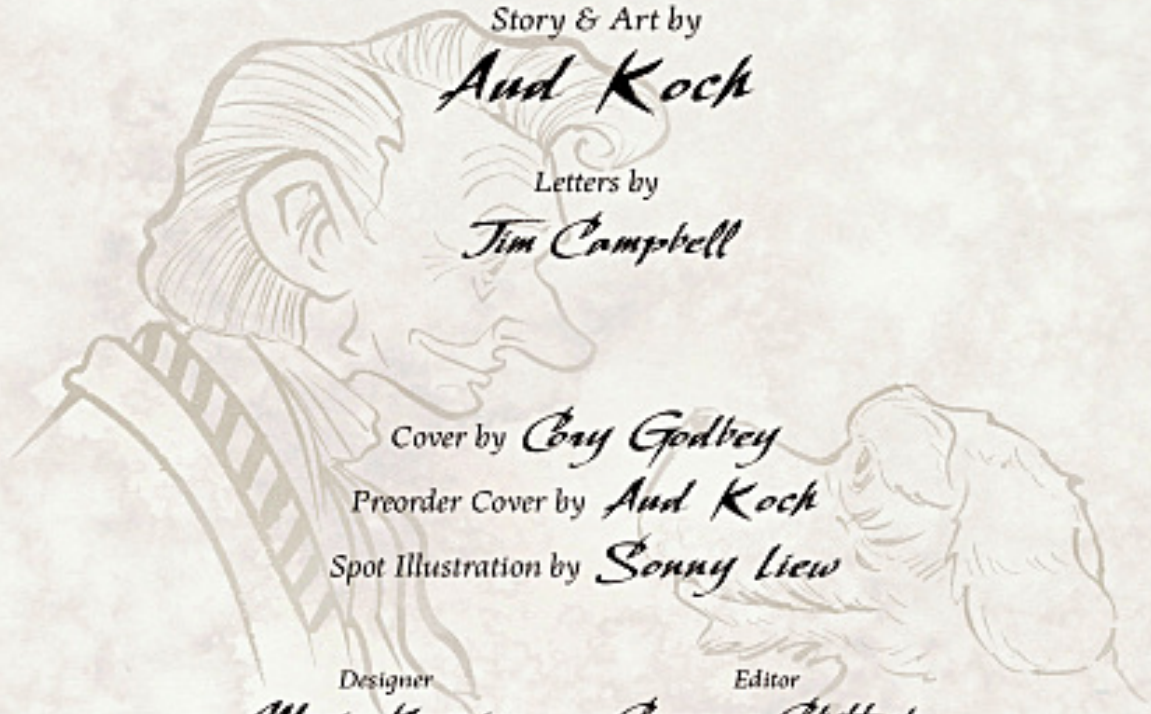
AUD KOCH

LORELEI: DAUGHTER of the RHINE

Story & Art by
Aud Koch

Letters by
Jim Campbell



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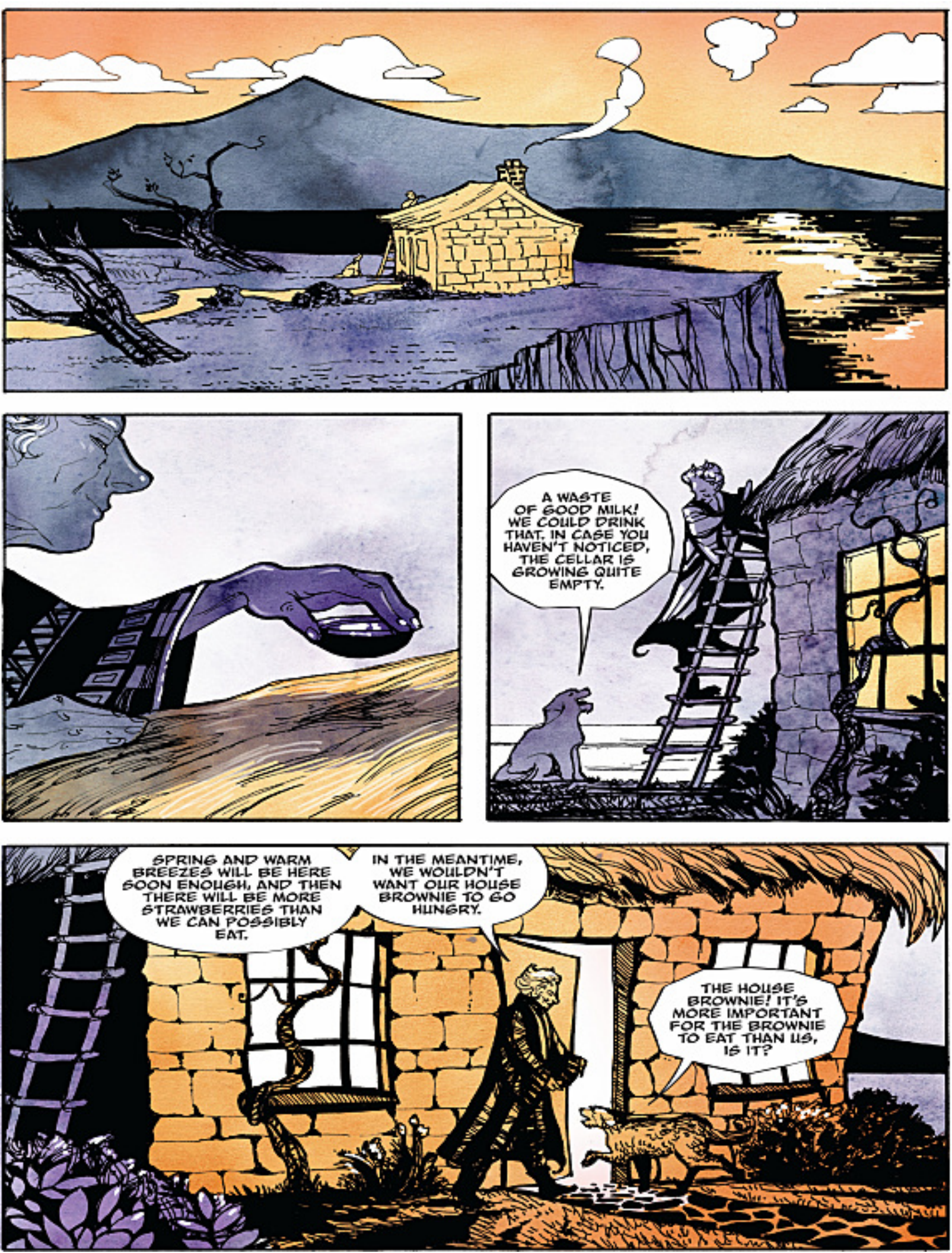
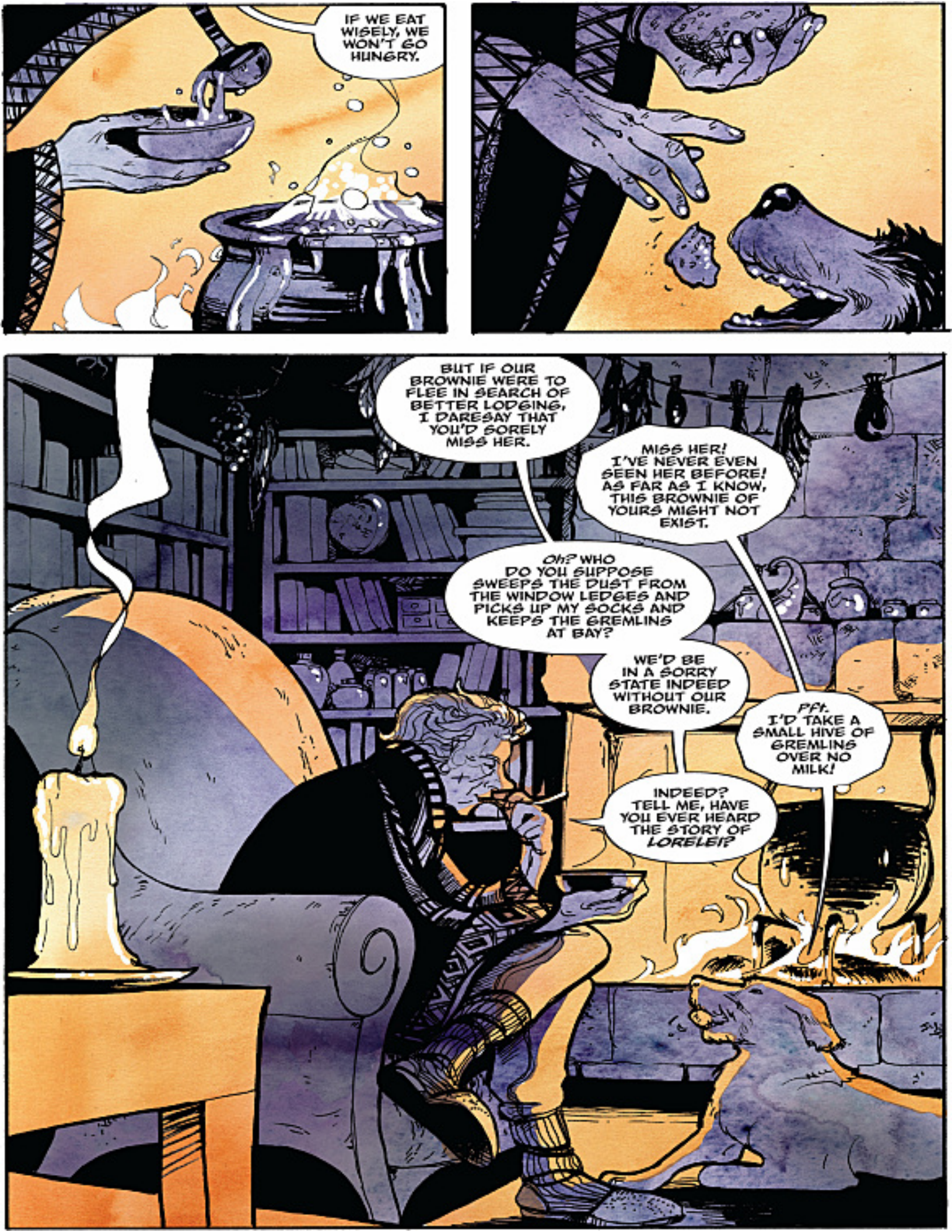
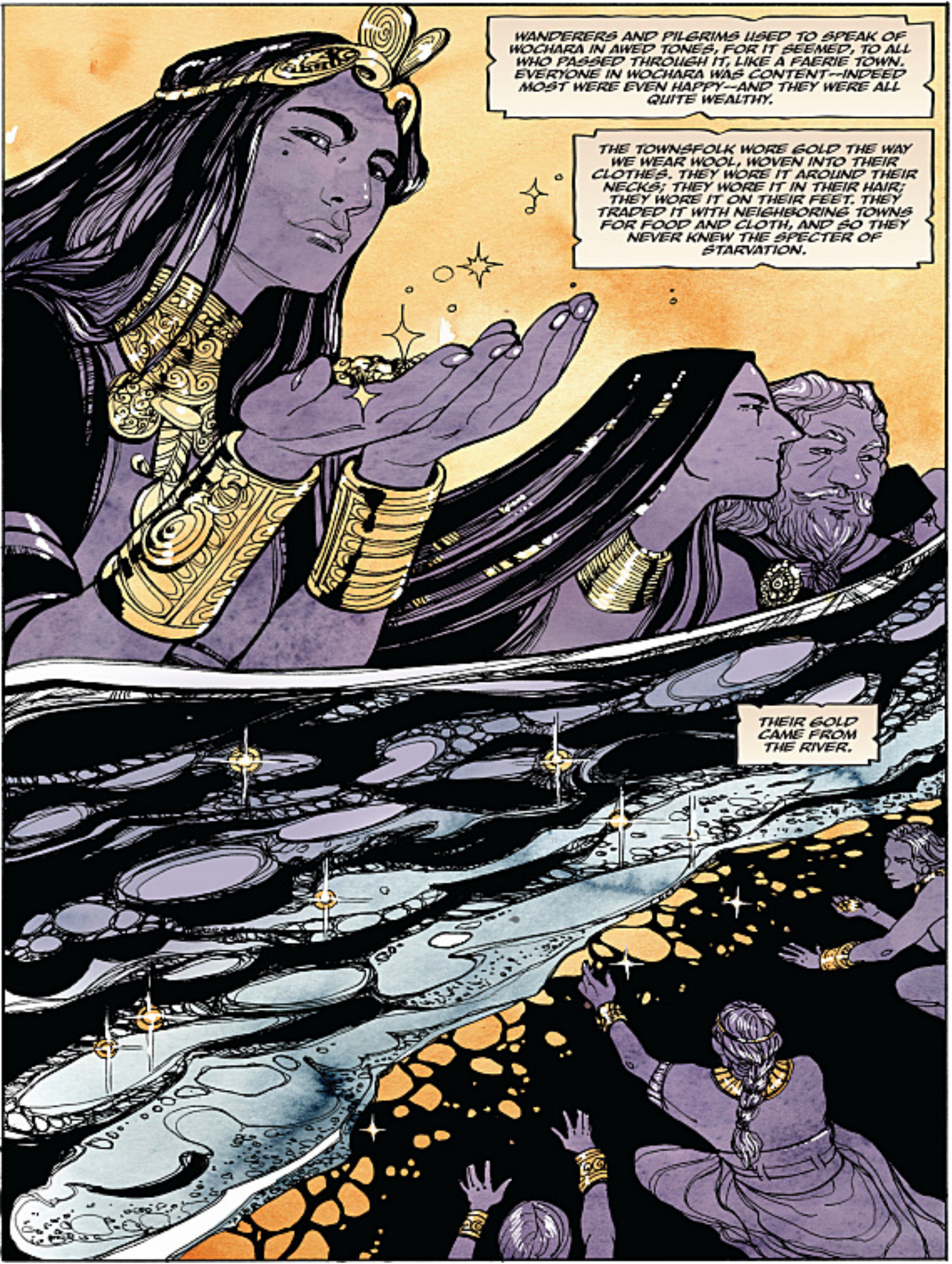
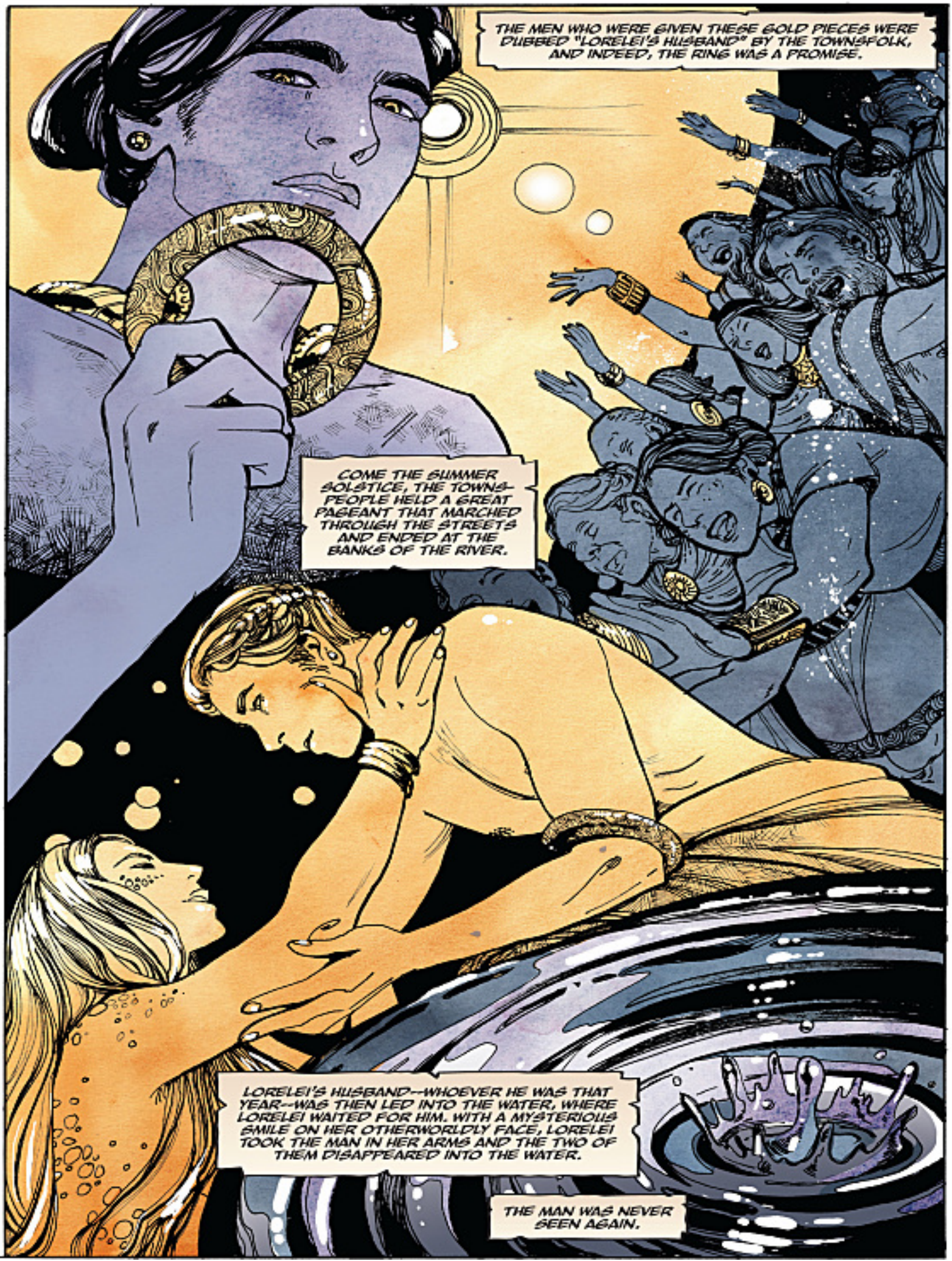

A WASTE OF GOOD MILK! WE COULD DRINK THAT. IN CASE YOU HAVEN'T NOTICED, THE CELLAR IS GROWING QUITE EMPTY.
SPRING AND WARM BREEZES WILL BE HERE SOON ENOUGH, AND THEN THERE WILL BE MORE STRAWBERRIES THAN WE CAN POSSIBLY EAT.
IN THE MEANTIME, WE WOULDN'T WANT OUR HOUSE BROWNIE TO GO HUNGRY.
THE HOUSE BROWNIE! IT'S MORE IMPORTANT FOR THE BROWNIE TO EAT THAN US, IS IT?

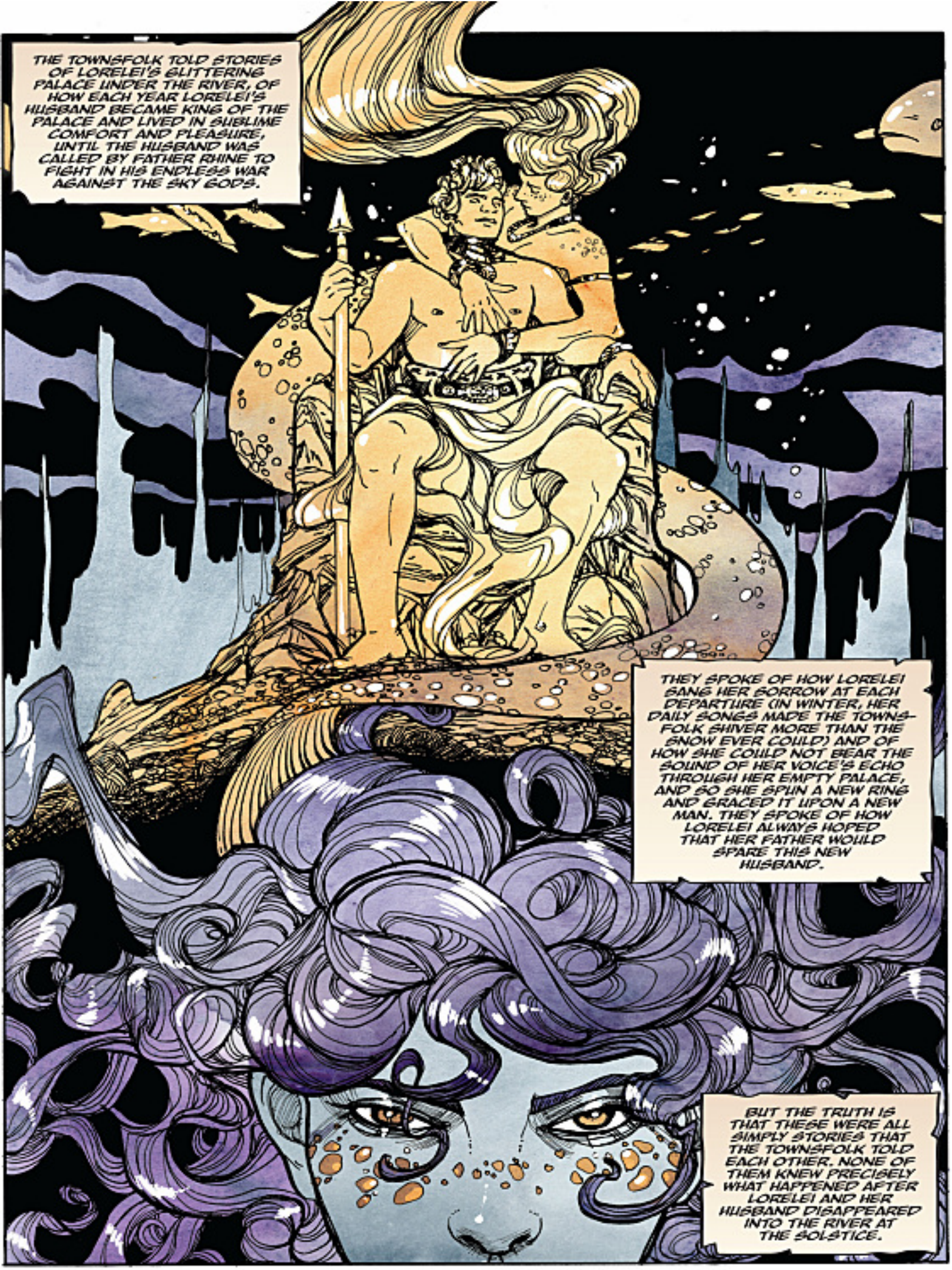

IF WE EAT WISELY, WE WON'T GO HUNGRY.
BUT IF OUR BROWNIE WERE TO FLEE IN SEARCH OF BETTER LODGING, I DARESAY THAT YOU'D SORELY MISS HER.
MISS HER! I'VE NEVER EVEN SEEN HER BEFORE! AS FAR AS I KNOW, THIS BROWNIE OF YOURS MIGHT NOT EXIST.
Oh? WHO DO YOU SUPPOSE SWEEPS THE DUST FROM THE WINDOW LEDGES AND PICKS UP MY SOCKS AND KEEPS THE GREMLINS AT BAY?
WE'D BE IN A SORRY STATE INDEED WITHOUT OUR BROWNIE.
Pft. I'D TAKE A SMALL HIVE OF GREMLINS OVER NO MILK!
INDEED? TELL ME, HAVE YOU EVER HEARD THE STORY OF *LORELEI*?

LORELEI? IS THAT A GREEK MYTH?
NOT QUITE.
ONCE UPON A TIME...
...IN OLD GERMANIA, THERE WAS A TOWN CALLED WOCHARA, WHICH SAT ON THE BANKS OF THE RHINE RIVER.


WANDERERS AND PILGRIMS USED TO SPEAK OF WOCHARA IN AWED TONES, FOR IT SEEMED, TO ALL WHO PASSED THROUGH IT, LIKE A FAERIE TOWN. EVERYONE IN WOCHARA WAS CONTENT--INDEED MOST WERE EVEN HAPPY--AND THEY WERE ALL QUITE WEALTHY.
THE TOWNSFOLK WORE GOLD THE WAY WE WEAR WOOL, WOVEN INTO THEIR CLOTHES. THEY WORE IT AROUND THEIR NECKS; THEY WORE IT IN THEIR HAIR; THEY WORE IT ON THEIR FEET. THEY TRADED IT WITH NEIGHBORING TOWNS FOR FOOD AND CLOTH, AND SO THEY NEVER KNEW THE SPECTER OF STARVATION.
THEIR GOLD CAME FROM THE RIVER.

THEIR GOLD, IN FACT, CAME FROM LORELEI, WHO WAS THE LADY OF THE RIVER, DAUGHTER OF FATHER RHINE.
EVERY DAY, HER SONGS ECHOED FROM THE GREAT BLUFF THAT BORE HER NAME, DRIFTING THROUGH THE TOWN AND CHEERING UP THE WOMEN WHO WORKED AT THE LOOMS AND THE MEN WHO REAPED IN THE NEARBY FIELDS.
"LORELEI IS AT WORK," THEY TOLD EACH OTHER WHEN HER CLARION SONG BEGAN AT NOON.
THE TOWNSFOLK DID NOT KNOW WHAT THE PRECISE NATURE OF LORELEI'S WORK WAS, BUT THEY KNEW THAT IT WAS SHE WHO BROUGHT THEM THEIR GOLD.
EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, WHEN THE FISHING BOATS WERE PLYING THE WATERS OF THE GREAT RIVER, LORELEI ROSE UP FROM THE WAVES AND GRACED ONE OF THE FISHERMEN WITH A BRACELET OR RING OF BREATHTAKING DESIGN, TOO DELICATE AND FINE TO BE THE WORK OF A HUMAN.

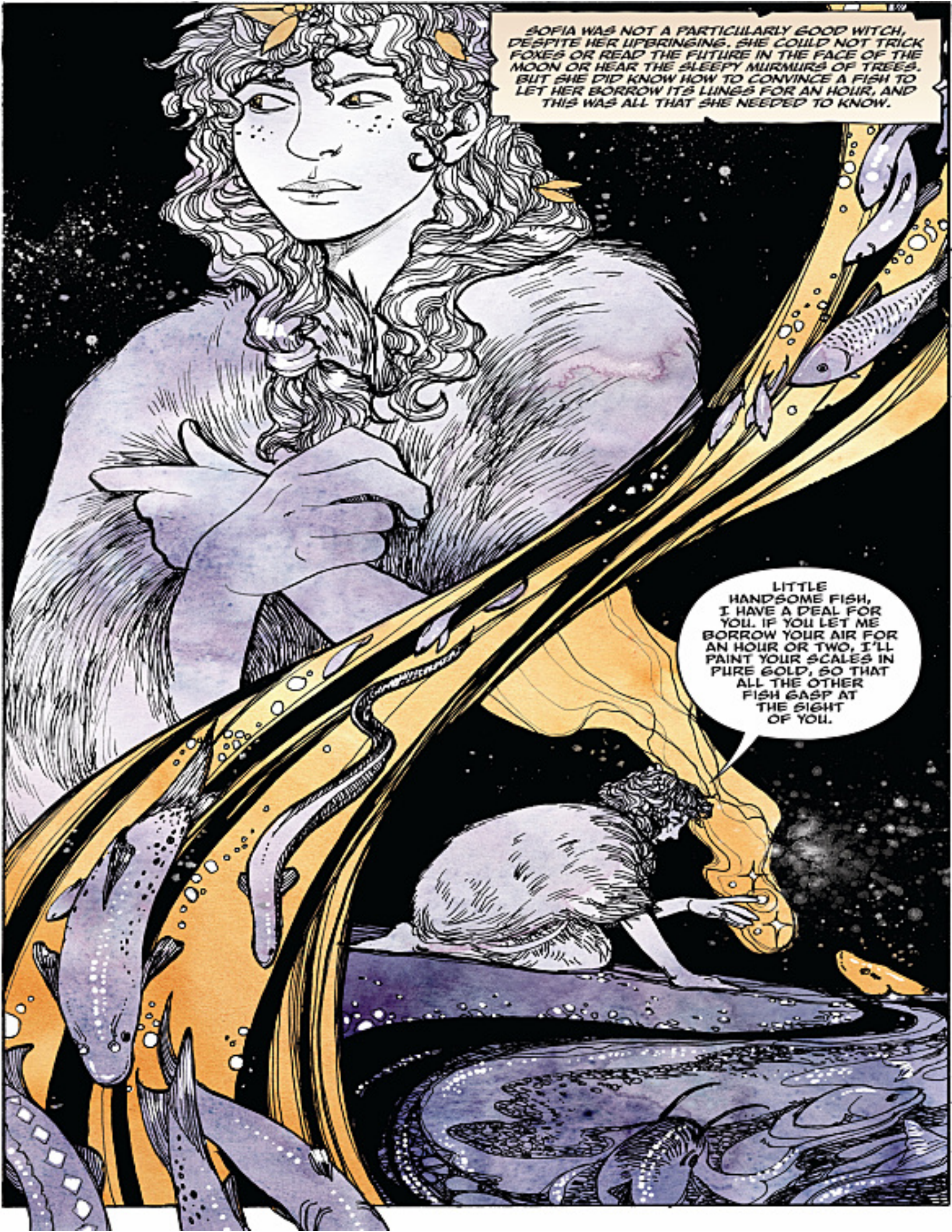

THE MEN WHO WERE GIVEN THESE GOLD PIECES WERE DUBBED "LORELEI'S HUSBAND" BY THE TOWNSFOLK, AND INDEED, THE RING WAS A PROMISE.
COME THE SUMMER SOLSTICE, THE TOWNSPEOPLE HELD A GREAT PAGEANT THAT MARCHED THROUGH THE STREETS AND ENDED AT THE BANKS OF THE RIVER.
LORELEI'S HUSBAND--WHOEVER HE WAS THAT YEAR--WAS THEN LED INTO THE WATER, WHERE LORELEI WAITED FOR HIM. WITH A MYSTERIOUS SMILE ON HER OTHERWORLDLY FACE, LORELEI TOOK THE MAN IN HER ARMS AND THE TWO OF THEM DISAPPEARED INTO THE WATER.
THE MAN WAS NEVER SEEN AGAIN.


THE TOWNSFOLK TOLD STORIES OF LORELEI'S GLITTERING PALACE UNDER THE RIVER, OF HOW EACH YEAR LORELEI'S HUSBAND BECAME KING OF THE PALACE AND LIVED IN SUBLIME COMFORT AND PLEASURE, UNTIL THE HUSBAND WAS CALLED BY FATHER RHINE TO FIGHT IN HIS ENDLESS WAR AGAINST THE SKY GODS.
THEY SPOKE OF HOW LORELEI SANG HER SORROW AT EACH DEPARTURE (IN WINTER, HER DAILY SONGS MADE THE TOWNSFOLK SHIVER MORE THAN THE SNOW EVER COULD) AND OF HOW SHE COULD NOT BEAR THE SOUND OF HER VOICE'S ECHO THROUGH HER EMPTY PALACE, AND SO SHE SPUN A NEW RING AND GRACED IT UPON A NEW MAN. THEY SPOKE OF HOW LORELEI ALWAYS HOPED THAT HER FATHER WOULD SPARE THIS NEW HUSBAND.
BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT THESE WERE ALL SIMPLY STORIES THAT THE TOWNSFOLK TOLD EACH OTHER. NONE OF THEM KNEW PRECISELY WHAT HAPPENED AFTER LORELEI AND HER HUSBAND DISAPPEARED INTO THE RIVER AT THE SOLSTICE.

NONE OF THE VILLAGERS KNEW THE TRUTH, AND THEY WERE ALL HAPPY AND RICH.
AS ALL THINGS GO, THIS EDEN COULD NOT LAST. IT ENDED THE YEAR THAT LORELEI CHOSE THE WRONG MAN TO BE HER HUSBAND. IT ENDED THE YEAR THAT LORELEI CHOSE HEINRICH.
YOU SEE, THE PROBLEM WITH HEINRICH WAS A GIRL NAMED SOFIA. WHEN THEY WERE BOTH SIXTEEN, HEINRICH PROMISED TO LOVE SOFIA UNTIL HIS DYING BREATH, AND SOFIA, HIDDEN IN THE SHADOWS OF OAK TREES, SWORE NEVER TO LEAVE HEINRICH'S SIDE.
THEY HAD TOLD NO ONE OF THEIR VOWS, AFRAID AS THEY WERE OF THEIR FAMILIES' REACTIONS. SOFIA WAS THE DAUGHTER OF FOREST WITCHES, AND HEINRICH'S FAMILY, LIKE ALL OF THE WOCHARA TOWNSFOLK, WERE WARY OF THE FOREST.

ON THE EVE OF THE MIDSUMMER SOLSTICE, HEINRICH AND SOFIA MET BY MOONLIGHT TO CONCOCT A PLAN. THEY WHISPERED TO EACH OTHER; THEY HELD EACH OTHER'S HANDS; THEY KISSED--THEN THEY BROKE AWAY FROM EACH OTHER TO FACE THE COMING DAY.

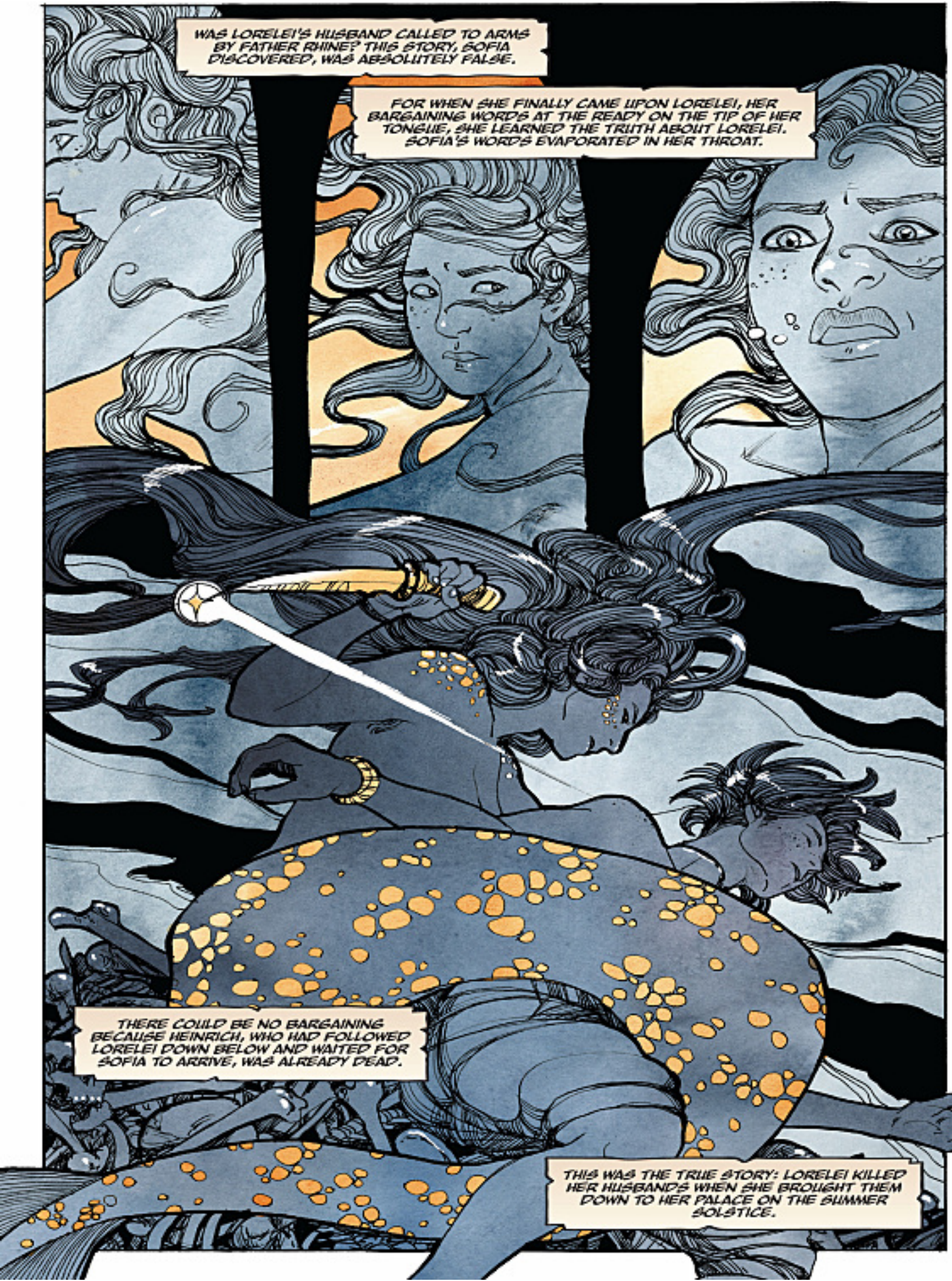
THEY BOTH FOLLOWED THE PLAN PERFECTLY: SOFIA TRAILED THE PAGEANT AS IT BORE HEINRICH TO THE RIVER. SHE WATCHED AS HE STEPPED INTO LORELEI'S ARMS.
SHE LINGERED AS THE TOWNSPEOPLE FLOCKED BACK TO WOCHARA'S TOWN SQUARE, WHERE A BONFIRE AND BARRELS OF ALE AND TABLES OF SWEETS WAITED FOR THEM.
SOFIA STEPPED DOWN TO THE WATER.


SOFIA WAS NOT A PARTICULARLY GOOD WITCH, DESPITE HER UPBRINGING. SHE COULD NOT TRICK FOXES OR READ THE FUTURE IN THE FACE OF THE MOON OR HEAR THE SLEEPY MURMURS OF TREES. BUT SHE DID KNOW HOW TO CONVINCE A FISH TO LET HER BORROW ITS LUNGS FOR AN HOUR, AND THIS WAS ALL THAT SHE NEEDED TO KNOW.
LITTLE HANDSOME FISH, I HAVE A DEAL FOR YOU. IF YOU LET ME BORROW YOUR AIR FOR AN HOUR OR TWO, I'LL PAINT YOUR SCALES IN PURE GOLD, SO THAT ALL THE OTHER FISH GASP AT THE SIGHT OF YOU.

WITH THE FISH'S GILLS CURVING ON HER NECK, SOFIA DIVED INTO THE RHINE, AND SHE SWAM TO FIND HER LOVE. SHE SWAM TO FIND LORELEI, TO BARGAIN WITH HER FOR HEINRICH'S LIFE. SHE SWAM TO FIND OUT IF THE TOWNSFOLK'S STORIES WERE TRUE.

THE TALE OF LORELEI'S PALACE: YES, THAT STORY WAS TRUE. DEEP UNDER THE WATERS OF THE RHINE, DEEPER THAN ANY OF THE TOWNSPEOPLE DARED TO VENTURE, THE PALACE GLEAMED LIKE A CROWN MADE OF ICE AND GOLD.

THE STORY OF THE SUBLIME LUXURY OF LORELEI'S PALACE? THIS STORY, SOFIA HAD A HARDER TIME VERIFYING. THE PALACE WAS CERTAINLY STATELY AND GLAMOROUS, BUT IT WAS TOO QUIET AND LONELY TO BE TRULY COMFORTABLE.
AS SHE SWAM THROUGH ITS HALLWAYS AND SEARCHED ITS CHAMBERS, SHE FOUND IT EMPTY, SAVE FOR DRIFTING SCHOOLS OF FISH.


WAS LORELEI'S HUSBAND CALLED TO ARMS BY FATHER RHINE? THIS STORY, SOFIA DISCOVERED, WAS ABSOLUTELY FALSE.
FOR WHEN SHE FINALLY CAME UPON LORELEI, HER BARGAINING WORDS AT THE READY ON THE TIP OF HER TONGUE, SHE LEARNED THE TRUTH ABOUT LORELEI. SOFIA'S WORDS EVAPORATED IN HER THROAT.
THERE COULD BE NO BARGAINING BECAUSE HEINRICH, WHO HAD FOLLOWED LORELEI DOWN BELOW AND WAITED FOR SOFIA TO ARRIVE, WAS ALREADY DEAD.
THIS WAS THE TRUE STORY: LORELEI KILLED HER HUSBANDS WHEN SHE BROUGHT THEM DOWN TO HER PALACE ON THE SUMMER SOLSTICE.

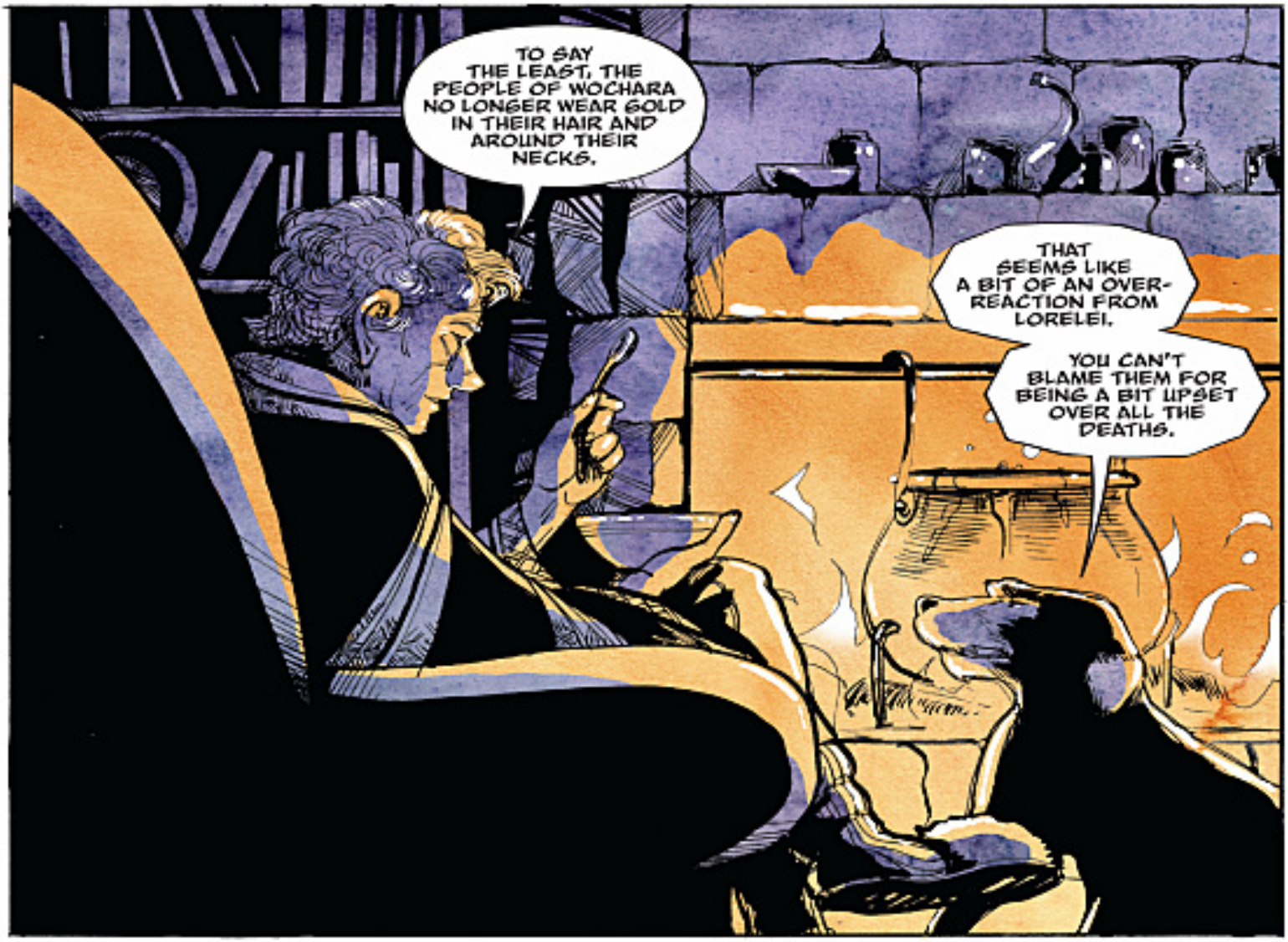
PERHAPS LORELEI HEARD SOFIA'S WAIL OF MISERY--OR PERHAPS SHE DIDN'T.
SHE CERTAINLY PAID NO HEED AS SOFIA FLED THE PALACE, THE RIVER, THE BANKS, STUMBLING DUMBLY INTO THE TOWN OF WOCHARA.

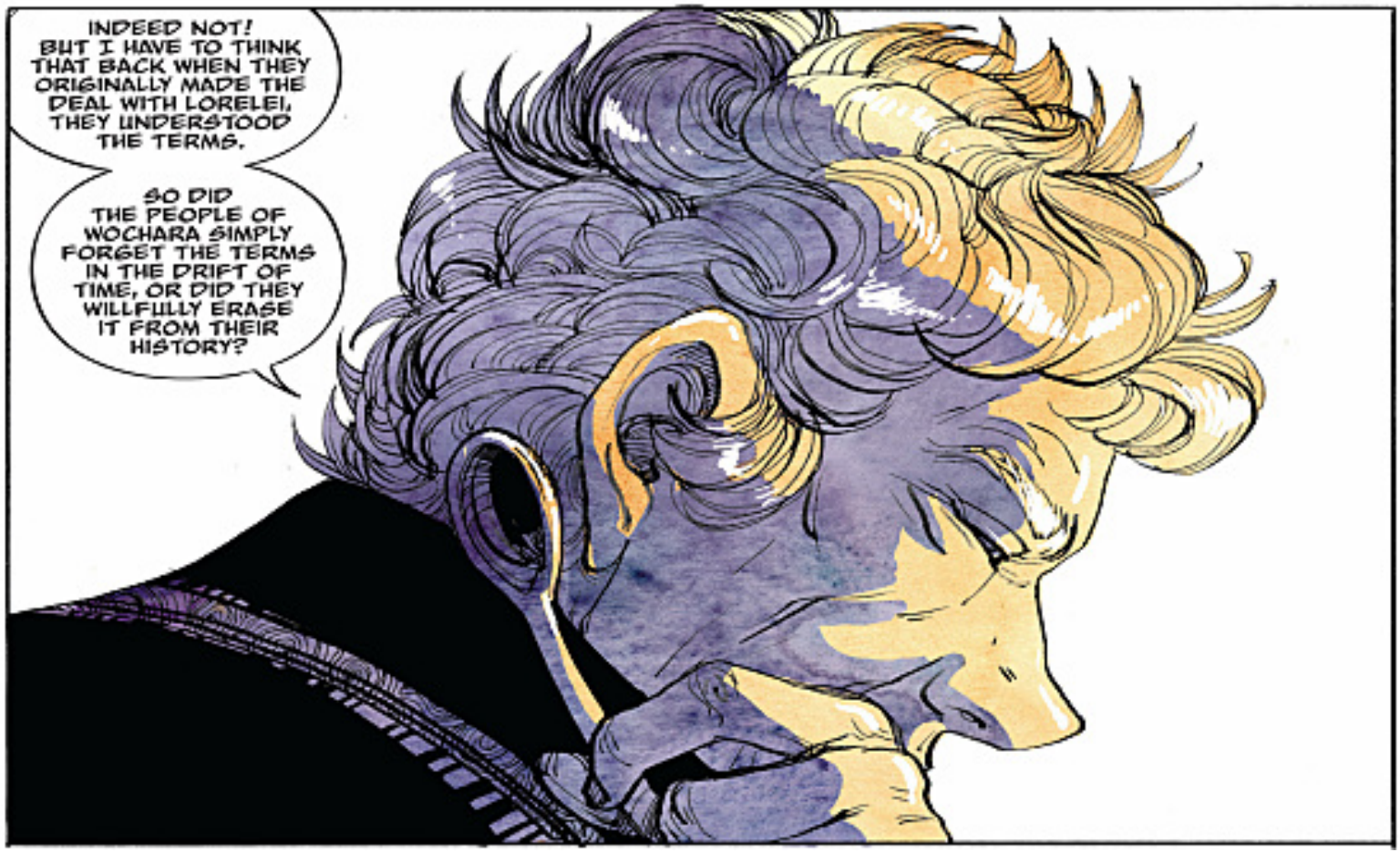
LORELEI PAID NO HEED AS SOFIA SCREAMED A HALT TO THE TOWNSFOLK'S DRUNKEN CELEBRATIONS AROUND THE BONFIRE, NOR DID SHE HEAR AS SOFIA TOLD THEM THE TRUTH OF WHAT SHE'D SEEN DEEP IN THE WATERS OF THE RHINE.
SHE DIDN'T HEAR AS THEY DEBATED AMONG THEMSELVES THE MERITS OF TRUSTING A WITCH, AMBIVALENT IN THEIR ARGUMENTS UNTIL SOFIA'S FURIOUS WORDS--AND THEIR DRINKS--GOT THE BETTER OF THEM, HEATING UP THEIR BLOOD AND LOOSENING THEIR TONGUES.

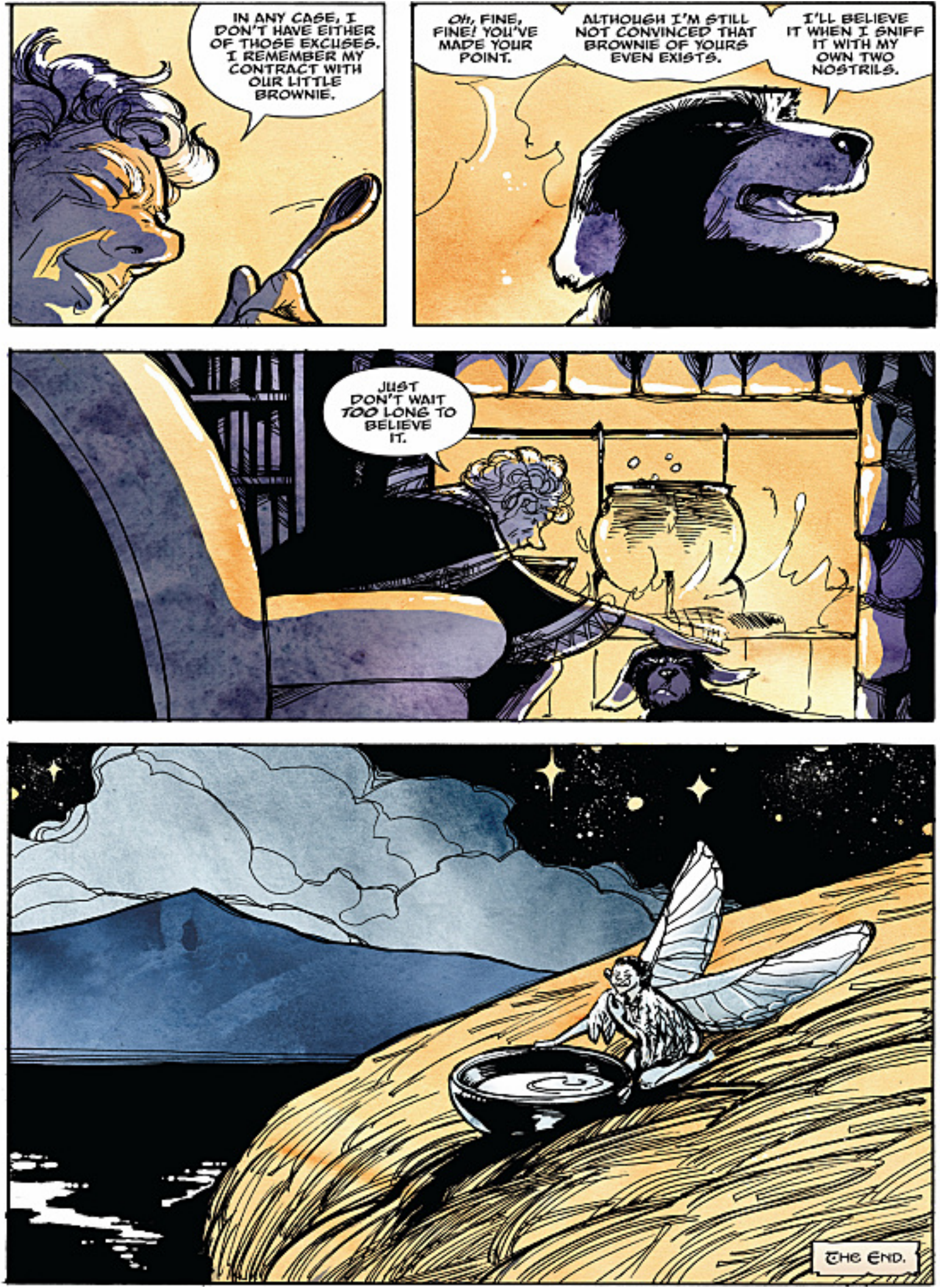
HOWEVER, LORELEI DID HEAR WHEN THEY MARCHED TO THE BANKS OF THE RIVER IN A ROARING, JANGLING CROWD, AND DEMANDED TO SPEAK WITH HER.
LISTEN, LORELEI! THERE SHALL BE NO MORE HUSBANDS FOR YOU UNLESS YOU PROVE THIS WITCH TO BE A LIAR!
THERE SHALL BE NO MORE HUSBANDS FOR YOU IF YOU PROMISE OUR MEN ONLY DEATH! WE WILL NOT STAND FOR OUR MEN TO BE KILLED LIKE THIS!

LORELEI HEARD, AND SHE WAS NOT AMUSED.
SHE ROSE FROM THE WATERS IN A MAELSTROM.
YOU SPITEFUL LITTLE CREATURES!
HOW DO YOU THINK I SPIN MY GOLD? IT DOES NOT APPEAR OUT OF THIN AIR!
BONE AND BLOOD, WATER AND STONE--THE SPELLS TO CREATE GOLD DO NOT COME CHEAPLY! SO YOU COVET MY GOLD BUT REFUSE MY PRICE?
THEN THERE SHALL BE NO MORE GOLD FOR YOU! NO MORE GOLD, NO MORE WEALTH, NO MORE HAPPINESS!
SO BE IT!

LORELEI DOVE INTO THE ANGRY, CHURNING WATERS, SINKING DEEP, DEEPER, DEEPEST, UNTIL NO HINT OF HER SHADOW COULD BE SEEN--NOT THEN, NOT NOW, AND NOT ANY TIME IN BETWEEN.
WITHOUT LORELEI, THE GOLD, WHICH HAD PREVIOUSLY LITTERED THE BANKS NEAR THE TOWN, PETERED OUT, UNTIL IT GLITTERED ONLY IN THE TOWNSFOLK'S MEMORIES.


TO SAY THE LEAST, THE PEOPLE OF WOCHARA NO LONGER WEAR GOLD IN THEIR HAIR AND AROUND THEIR NECKS.
THAT SEEMS LIKE A BIT OF AN OVER-REACTION FROM LORELEI.
YOU CAN'T BLAME THEM FOR BEING A BIT UPSET OVER ALL THE DEATHS.


INDEED NOT! BUT I HAVE TO THINK THAT BACK WHEN THEY ORIGINALLY MADE THE DEAL WITH LORELEI, THEY UNDERSTOOD THE TERMS.
SO DID THE PEOPLE OF WOCHARA SIMPLY FORGET THE TERMS IN THE DRIFT OF TIME, OR DID THEY WILLFULLY ERASE IT FROM THEIR HISTORY?


IN ANY CASE, I DON'T HAVE EITHER OF THOSE EXCUSES. I REMEMBER MY CONTRACT WITH OUR LITTLE BROWNIE.
OH, FINE, FINE! YOU'VE MADE YOUR POINT.
ALTHOUGH I'M STILL NOT CONVINCED THAT BROWNIE OF YOURS EVEN EXISTS.
I'LL BELIEVE IT WHEN I SNIFF IT WITH MY OWN TWO NOSTRILS.
JUST DON'T WAIT TOO LONG TO BELIEVE IT.
THE END.

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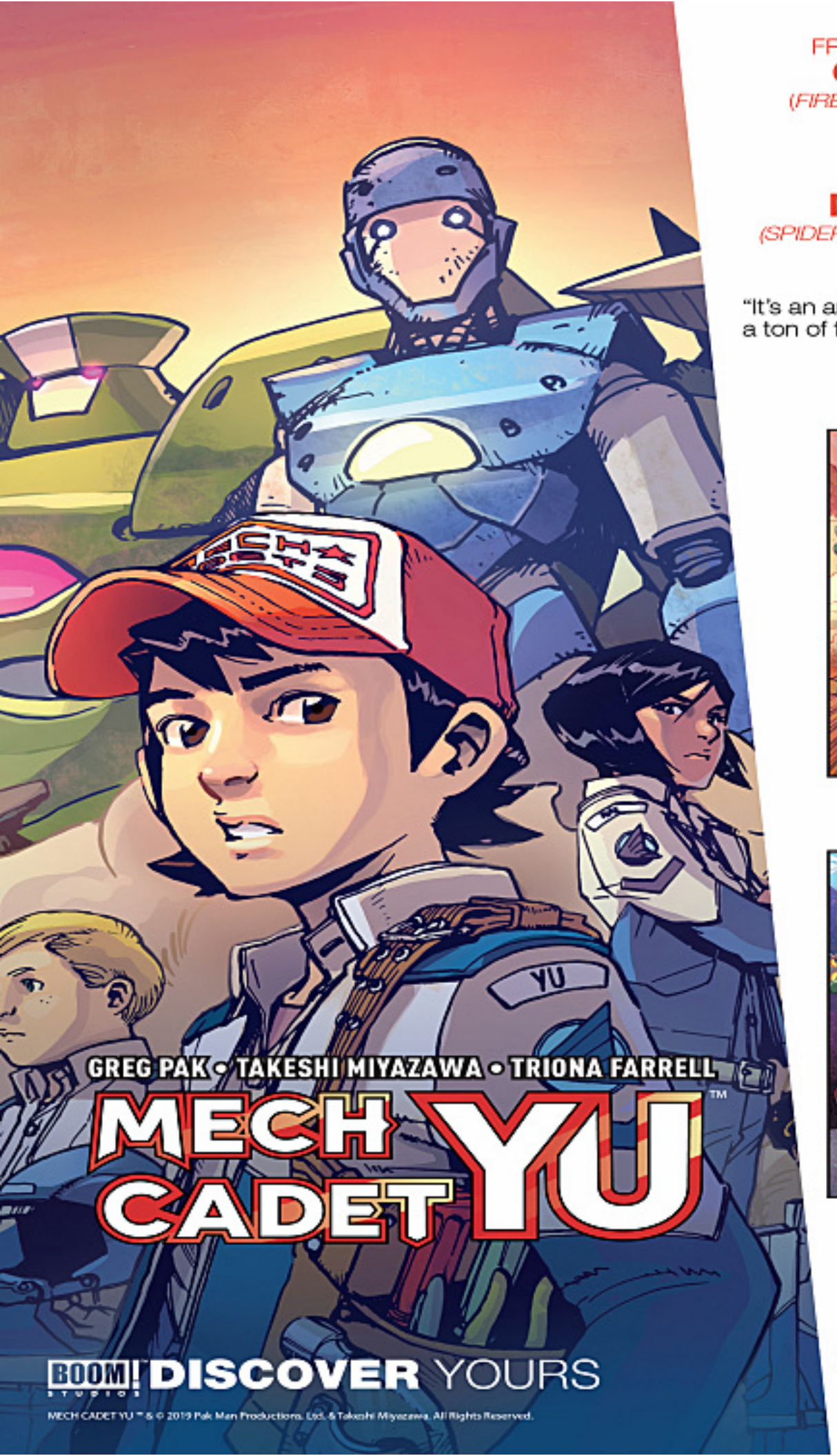

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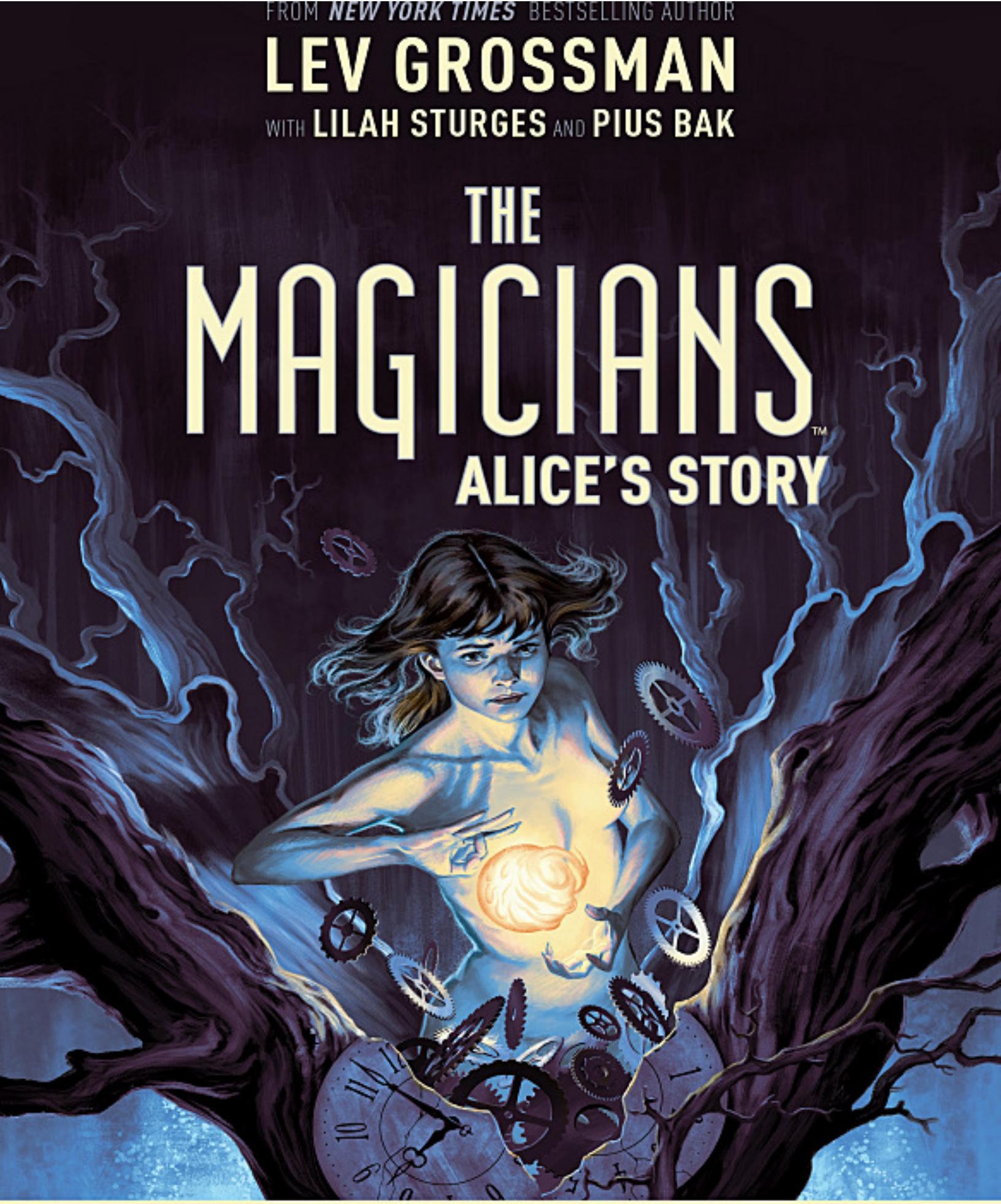

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